



WEEKLY PARASHA

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A Leader to (or of) the People?

There are two types of leaders. The first comes *to* the people with a vision, bringing a message from on high down to those whom they would lead. The second emerges *from within* the people; they have internalized the people's deepest concerns and passions and can crystallize and articulate their inchoate longings. The goal of the first type is to gather followers by finding those who are persuaded by the message, passion, and vision that the leader brings. The goal of the second is to bring their message to society and to those in power in order to bring about true change. Two types of leaders: one comes from above, the other from below. As the Gemara in Yoma (19a) phrases it in reference to the *Kohanim*, messengers of God or messengers of the people.

Which type was Moshe? Framed this way, the answer is obvious: Moshe brought God's message down from on high in the tablets that he received on Mt. Sinai. Moshe's career undoubtedly stemmed from a deep concern for his people: "And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown, that he went out to his brothers, and he looked on their burdens" (Shemot, 2:11). What a tremendous act to leave the security and comfort of Pharaoh's house to do something about the suffering of his people, simply because he cared! Feelings of kinship motivated him to see, understand, and feel their anguish. But while Moshe was acting *for* the people, his motivation and his actions were his own. Thus, they reject him the following day: "Who made you a prince and judge over us?" (2:14). How could it be otherwise? Moshe is an outsider from a position of privilege. He cares for them; he acts on their behalf, but he has not taken the time to talk to them, to understand them. He may be the leader for the people, but without investing in them or identifying with them, he will not be a leader *from* or *of* the people.

Perhaps this is why Moshe was concerned with how his message would be received when he first encountered God in the burning

bush: What if they ask God's name? What if they say that God has not sent me? What if "they will not believe me" or "they will not listen to my voice?" (4:1). In response, God revealed God's name to Moshe and gave him signs to show the people. Moshe has imagined an entire conversation taking place when he comes to the people, but what actually happens? "Aaron spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed" (4:30–31). There is no back-and-forth, no asking for God's name or any other proof: here's what God said; here are the signs, and the people immediately believed.

We would be hard-pressed to find any instance in which Moshe actually has meaningful discourse with those he leads. It seems that no one was in a position to get a real conversation going. Moshe was not going to engage the people, and they were not going to engage him. When Moshe delivered a message they were eager to hear, they followed him, but they did not embrace or connect with him. Thus, although the people *believed* and *heard*, it was not Moshe in whom they believed or to whom they listened. "And the people believed and they heard that *God* had remembered his people" (4:31). Moshe is completely absent from this verse; it was God and the message, not Moshe, that the people connected to.

Moshe won the people's backing without making any difficult investment in them, without truly understanding them, addressing their fears and concerns, or creating relationships. Such backing is easily lost. When Moshe and Aharon come to Pharaoh, the people are nowhere to be seen: "Afterwards Moshe and Aharon came and said to Pharaoh... 'And where were the elders? They had dropped off one by one'" (Rashi, quoting the Shemot Rabbah, 5:1). One can just imagine the scene:

Moshe says to Pharaoh, "We, together with the leaders of the

people...”

Pharaoh looks puzzled: “Together with whom?”

Moshe looks behind him, and there is no one there.

Moshe had become a leader without a people. He was a “messenger of God,” but he was not a “messenger of the people.”

And so opens our *parasha*. The people have complained vehemently and rejected Moshe; Moshe brought their message to God; God sends him back to the people. Once again, no success: “And they did not listen to Moshe, because of their anguished spirit and the cruel slavery” (6:9). He never really had their ear, and he certainly does not here. And what is God’s response? Forget the people; just worry about Pharaoh: “Go, speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt, that he let the people of Israel go out of his land” (6:11). From this point in the narrative, the Children of Israel disappear. In the entire story of the ten plagues leading up to the expulsion from Egypt, the only players are Moshe, Aharon, the magicians, and the Egyptian people. Moshe represents God, not his people, and thus the people are nowhere to be seen.

Moshe brings a message to the people and imposes it upon them. So it is with his approach to Pharaoh: this is what God says; this is what will happen; this is what you must do. Summing up the mission of Moshe and Aharon, the Torah implicitly equates their relationship to the people with their relationship to Pharaoh: “And [God] gave them a charge to the people of Israel, and to Pharaoh king of Egypt” (6:13). Moshe is a messenger of God to the people and a messenger of God to Pharaoh.

It is no surprise that the people must be forcibly dragged out of Egypt when the time of redemption comes. The people had to be *driven* out: “For they were driven out of Egypt, and they could not tarry” (12:39). God’s mighty hand was needed not only to compel Pharaoh, but the people as well. “For with a mighty hand he shall let them go and with a mighty hand he shall drive them out” (5:23).

This type of leadership is necessary when the people do not know what is best for them, when they are too enslaved in body and in soul to have the vision and strength needed to bring about change, to set themselves free. Perhaps only someone who came from a position of privilege, someone with freedom of body and spirit,

could have the clear vision to understand what true freedom is. Perhaps only someone who had not been ingrained with the qualities of subservience and submission could have the courage and the fortitude to withstand setbacks and failures. The necessary leader could not have emerged from the midst of the people. Taking the people out of Egypt needed leadership from above, leadership of a “mighty hand.”

This type of leadership, however, is not the leadership needed to take the people into the land. To become a free people they will require a leader who emerges from within. Moshe was the one to actualize the first four stages of redemption—“*vi’hotzeiti ... v’hitzalti ... vi’ga’alti ... vi’lakachti*,” “and I will take out ... and I will save ... and I will redeem ... and I will take them to me as a people.” For the fifth and final stage of redemption—“*vi’heiveiti*,” “and I will bring them into the Land” (6:6–8)—a leader from and of the people was needed.

A forcible leadership was necessary to free an enslaved people, to bring them the Divine Law, and to create them as a nation. But this is not what the people will need moving forward. “Rebels you have been against God from the day I have known you,” Moshe says at the end of forty years. Even after all this time, his relationship with the people has not changed. In his eyes they are rebellious and contrarian, and he must impose his and God’s will upon them with the staff, not with speech.

But the people have changed, and if Moshe has not, then he must step aside so that a new leader can take his place. This leader will be one who respects the people, who invests in each individual, and who embodies the people’s concerns, fears, passions, and ultimately, their vision of themselves. This is the type of religious leaders that we need today: leaders who embody not only God’s message from on high, but also the deepest religious, spiritual, and moral yearnings of the people below. This is the leadership that will take the people out of bondage and bring them into the Promised Land.

Shabbat Shalom!

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